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# The Population Discourse: A Transnational Matrix. The Case of Germany and Sweden

Thomas Etzemüller\*

**Abstract:** »Der Bevölkerungsdiskurs. Eine transnationale Matrix. Deutschland und Schweden im Vergleich«. Since the 19th century, the question of population has been discussed in the form of a specific matrix. Population is described as human capital. It can serve a modern nation as a resource if it is biologically and socially optimised, but could also pose a threat if 'degeneration' escalates. Thus, the demographic question is always dealt with in a dualistic manner. The human capitals' 'valuable' part does not breed enough children, the socially or biologically problematic or even 'substandard' part of the population produces far too much offspring. The fact that this pattern shapes the speaking about population transnationally, can be shown by comparing such very different social systems like Sweden and Germany.

**Keywords:** demography, eugenics, modernity, social politics, welfare state, population question, Sweden, Germany.

## I.

This paper is not about demography but the *speaking about demographical processes*. This is an important difference. Demographers deal with alleged real, objectively measurable developments. In contrast to them, I argue that demography is a construction – this notion exists since the end of the 19th century – and that this construction is formatted by a specific narrative pattern, which I call the 'matrix' of the population discourse. By claiming that the collecting and interpreting of demographical data is shaped by social factors, I do not want suggest that demography is a pseudo-science. The sociology of science has investigated for several decades how closely objective scientific methods and social processes are connected (e.g. Weingart 2003; Felt, Nowotny and Taschwer 1995). Analysing the population discourse is thus to be understood as a contribution to reflect on the demographers' scientific work.

First of all, a few words on the method. The – probably – most important representative of discourse analysis, Michel Foucault, did not think too much of the conception that ideas and statements have an origin, exert causal effects on each other or have been developed and uttered intentionally by autonomous individuals (cf. Foucault 1992, 1989; Williams 1999; Keller 2001, 2007). He

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investigated the rules of the formation of statements. These are characterised by either unity or breaches. To Foucault, statements initially were punctual incidents: they appear, become transformed and disappear. Discourses are the amount of statements that obey to one and the same principle of formation; discursive formations are the principles of distribution and diversification of statements. This is basically about the question why statements see the light of the day and others do not, and by which rules they become coalesced to an entity and dispersed on different surfaces.

Neither discourses nor their formation can be traced back to individuals and their intentions; they cannot be limited to one nation. There are, however, parallel or competing discourses. Statements can fade into other discourses and become transformed there; they also transform other discourses. Discourses or discursive formations, respectively, produce temporary units of statements that could have clear social effects on society. But, time and again, there are breaches. Discourses become transformed, transferred or they disappear. They do not have *one* origin, but arise from different sources; they do not develop into an ever increasing perfection, but change their shape, their target and the places of their occurrence. Things are not preexistent to discourses, but discourses are practices that generate the things (e.g. the “population”); they do not exert causal influence on each other, but they are the condition for the possibility of transformations; they do not have a hidden meaning that could be deciphered, but exert describable effects; they are no nature-given units, but owe their existence to specific historical constellations (which they, in turn, influence). A discourse is a concrete historical incident that gains or loses existence and shape in a field of other discourses and its relations to these.

In this sense, I will read statements made by scientists and publicists and which are located within the context of demographical analyses as part of a discursive formation in order to show what the matrix, which makes us speak about the “population” since the 19th century, looks like. It will become apparent that the population discourse is not a mere demographic question, but that it was (or still is?) connected to the eugenic question. I can only touch on that last issue here (cf. Etzemüller 2007). I would like to make plausible the transnational character of that matrix by using a German-Swedish comparison; i.e. a comparison of two political systems that do not seem to be in any way similar. The principle aim of this paper is to make a specific structure of speaking visible. The price I have to pay for this is the non-consideration of several differences (cf. Weipert 2006). But if one only investigates the question of population alongside its heterogeneity – i.e. authors, institutions, contexts, texts, all standing for themselves –, one cannot get a perspective on what is of interest here: In what way is it that population is spoken about – and in *what way is it not*? What are the social effects of this speaking? My intention is to break up the illusion of an alleged lack of alternatives to speak about the population, a lack that still goes without saying in statements of leading demographers with

scientific authority (cf. Birg 2005). Only when a discursive formation is exposed, the option to discuss demography in alternative models emerges, because the principles of the population question's construction become apparent.<sup>1</sup> The matrix does not only overlap different socio-political systems, but also political camps. Liberals, socialists, feminists, catholics and conservatives reproduced the population discourse similarly (or eluded it). Hence, an analysis employing moral or political categories is pointless; I will touch on that issue by comparing the German Friedrich Burgdörfer with the Swedes Alva and Gunnar Myrdal.

## II.

Since the 19th century the population question has been negotiated in an apocalyptic rhetoric. This discourse of crisis is marked by the fear of extinction, ageing and foreign infiltration. Thomas Robert Malthus' "An Essay on the Principle of Population" – published in 1798 – can be considered as this discourse's "urtext". In his essay, Malthus developed his influential "law of population": The alimantal margin can only be extended in a linear arithmetic, the population, however, proliferates exponentially. Thus, terrible famines and epidemics that adjust the demographic development to the alimantal basis consistently emerge. Malthus did not deem an unjust social and economical order to be the cause for these cyclical catastrophes, but the lower-orders' "irresponsible" lifestyle. Every time there is enough alimentation, they proliferate regularly in excess. Social welfare would only amplify the problem, Malthus declared (Malthus 1992).

The book became a classic. By its sheer continuous presence it could set the tone up until today and it does not matter whether one is pro or contra Malthus. In this book we find important parts of the matrix that has structured the population discourse since the end of the 19th century: the catastrophic *Gestus* (one is, basically, always one step behind the problem); the relation between population, resources and space as a measure for overpopulation; employing this measure as a relative measure ('empty' spaces could also be proportionally overpopulated); the differentiated consideration of fertility (the lower strata having to many children); differentiating the population in "worthy" and "un-worthy" members; mirroring allegedly natural developments with socio-political conditions; the moral charging of this mirroring (profligacy as a reason for calamity); the claim of invisible processes which experts have to make visible for the audience; regulating the population in quantity and quality by regulating their fertility; and finally the metaphoric, reductive, extremely neat technique of making visible (linear/exponential progression).

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<sup>1</sup> This is not new, but gains public attention first since millennium (cf. Schwentker 2006).

There is a second important line in the population discourse, i.e. eugenics (cf. Kühl 1997; Weingart, Kroll, and Bayertz 1992). By the end of the 19th century the young industrial societies seemed to have got into a severe crisis. Urbanisation, mechanisation, migration, the change of gender relations or the remodelling of political constitutions brought up utterly new habits – at the same time, more and more people lived in calamitous circumstances. Simultaneously, the academic disciplines of medicine and biology were on the rise and they promised a solution to the problems. First of all, Darwin's theory of evolution showed that nature required considerable adaptations from each species and that these either mutated within a certain time or fell victim to selection. Now, all of a sudden, the expanding industrial societies' social changes and problems could be explained. Several authors claimed that the lower strata's calamity did not result from immoral or short-sighted behaviour, as Malthus had thought, but was evidence for the increasing degeneration of the species 'man', which was due to modern life. Urbanisation, impoverishment, poor hygiene, diseases; in their eyes, all these developments attacked the genetic quality of mankind and multiplied itself progressively by heredity transmission right until doom – within this process, inherited *and individually acquired*, physical *and social* characteristics were passed on. *Actually*, according to this theory, nature kept an ideal balance by permanently selecting species that were not adjusted to their environment anymore. Human society, however, had become askew. Modernity destroyed positive genetic material, the degenerated people reproduced themselves thanks to welfare politics, selection was thus invalidated and the species seemed doomed. At least, or so experts thought, the mechanism of man's doom could be figured out. This again was a conclusion from nature to social order – just as Malthus did –, but this time from a strictly physiological adaptability of all creatures to their environment, as Darwin's theory implied, to the meaning of men's individual qualities for the persistence of the human species, in other words: the middle-class social order. In this worldview, the central problem were the 'feeble-minded', since they could not – unlike mad people – be kept in asylums. They lived their "immoral" lives incognito and handed down their moral-biological defects to innumerable offspring thanks to their above-average reproductive instinct. The eugenicists promised to detect these defects and to excise them from the *Volkskörper* – cleanly and perfectly like doctors cut out cancer. It is well-known to what this thinking led in Germany. For us it is central that the question of hereditary quality was added to that of the population's quantity.

Since the 19th century population is discussed in a specific pattern: as a resource and a threat – its quantity and quality. This is the matrix that shaped the speaking about population in Western Europe and the USA at the early and mid-20s and the end of the 20th century. A population can be a nation's resource if it strengthens the nation with numerous and healthy children. It can become a threat if the wrong social class proliferates, i.e. the biologically "infe-

rior” – today we call it the “socially problematic” – lower strata, while the biologically (or socially) “superior” middle class irresponsibly commits demographic suicide (*Rassenselbstmord*). This would expose the nation to an “infiltration” by “racially inferior” – today: “culturally alien” – peoples with a higher fertility than the threatened civilised (i.e. Western) people. In this manner, “population” became a political issue: the question of the social and biological future of the established social order, of a nation or even of the Western World. Hence, the German political economist Julius Wolf could phrase apodictically in 1931 that “the population question of today is fundamentally a question of the social order” (Wolf 1931, 65).

### III.

Thus, population became the starting-point for bio-politics to regulate society. The sociopolitical *and* eugenic grand-programmes of the 1930s and 1940s were closely connected to the attempt to create a “healthy *Volkskörper*” by strengthening its positively attributed elements and eliminating its negatively attributed parts. I would like to sketch this development following the examples of Sweden and Germany (cf. Broberg and Roll-Hansen 2005).

In the 19th century, the situation was yet vague. Neo-Malthusians could make themselves heard in the USA, Great Britain, Sweden and Germany. They followed Malthus’ assumption that – on the whole – there were too many people within the respective national spaces and that birth-reduction was thus necessary. They considered the human capital – one of the nation’s resources – to be threatened by a birth rate that was much too high. In contrast to Malthus, however, they put the focus on the lower orders’ sex education and the legalisation of abortion and contraceptives. Advocating this, Neo-Malthusians such as Annie Besant in Great Britain or Knut Wicksell and Hinke Bergegren in Sweden, caused veritable public scandal. Nevertheless, Neo-Malthusian argumentation remained within the matrix mentioned above, since it also emanated from a class-specifically differentiated fertility, albeit the fact that it became critically accentuated to capitalism. While the middle- and upper-classes had the contraceptive techniques, so the argumentation went, capitalism created a host of unemployed, ergo cheap labour-slaves, tax-payers and soldiers by the means of a high working-class fertility. Thousands of children did not survive the bad living conditions of their families; the survivors then physically weakened the labour force due to their poorness. The fighting power of the working class was only to be enhanced by a drastic reduction of their number of children. Families from the lower social strata were to be provided with an opportunity also to procreate qualitatively premium and healthy children. In this way, Neo-Malthusianism embraced qualitative arguments; and this, however, could even mount to unmasked racism. They, for example, pointed to a difference in fertility between different countries which correlated with a reversed racial quality.

A flood of “inferior” immigrants with many children from poor countries threatened – as “parasites” – the nations of a higher culture but a lower birth rate. Thus, after World War I some Neo-Malthusians demanded a clause in the League of Nations’ contract that all member states were to limit their birth rate in such a way that their population could comfortably live within their own territory and that a territorial expansion would not be necessary. Growth of population should not be an acceptable cause to legitimise any demand for territory.

In the early 20th century, Neo-Malthusianism lost ground. First of all, this was due to the yet unforeseen possibility of providing a significantly extended alimental base for the industrial nations thanks to agro-technological achievements. Less and less people famished and this rebutted one of the Neo-Malthusians’ central argumentative elements. Another crucial development was the birth rate’s continuous decline since the late 19th century. This decline was an effect of the first demographic transition, i.e. the transition from high to low death and birth rates. This phenomenon was already well known in 1912, but was apparently considered a “mystical hypothesis”. If this theory were true – Julius Wolf mocked –, then “the human reproductive organs would somehow follow the official reports on population statistics and produce less children, if it becomes obvious that less are dying” (Wolf 1931, 61, Wolf quotes E.A. Roß). In the discussion on population, it was in fact the *middle phase* of the transition that for a long time remained the gauge for an alleged natural development of population: The death rate declined, but the birth rate remained high so that the population growth increased massively. As the birth rate belatedly aligned itself to the sinking death rate, the bogeyman of the population’s “extinction” appeared. Advocates of over- and underpopulation still fought bitter fights at international conferences, but only after World War II Neomalthusianism could gain ground again; this time in the “Third World”. At that point of time the middle phase of transition was still the Western World’s ideal, while the final phase was considered a threat. When it came to the developing countries, however, it was the *middle phase* of transition that was considered a threat, while the third phase of transition was yearned for, since “organic substances” (*Biomasse*) from the “South” threatened “human capital” from the “North” (Wichterich 1994, 31).

Since the beginning of the century, the debate was dominated by the demographic-eugenic worst-case scenario. This was neither a merely populist trick with which magazines – then as now – could increase their circulation, nor a means which demographers employed for decades to get through to the allegedly ignorant society. Actually, one could find behind it a dark vision of the future social development, which I would like to underline with an exemplary quote:

Since the middle class is shrinking and the upper class, which lives primarily in the cities, only has little offspring, it is clear indeed, that the people become

proletarianised and that the people take a more deteriorated racial form than before the industrialisation. In other words: A host of more or less weakly equipped individuals is developing and they will soon make themselves heard. If it does not work out in a good way, they will employ revolutionary or anarchistic (Bolshevistic) methods and will give a short shrift to anyone who is against it, i.e. the upper classes will have to carry the can. There will be a reign of terror. Everything will get out of order. The culture will decline. The people will soon degenerate and is going right to its downfall. New peoples will invade. Then it could get better or worse (Lundborg, Herman. 1921, 26 et seq.).

Hermann Lundborg published this vision in 1921 in German at the well-established Gustav Fischer Verlag. Lundborg was a Swedish eugenicist and in 1921 founder of the world's very first institute for racial biology in Uppsala. In 1913 he had already made himself known with extensive "Medizinisch-biologische Familienforschungen innerhalb eines 2232köpfigen Bauerngeschlechtes in Schweden (Provinz Blekinge)" ("Medico-biological Family Research within a Swedish Peasant Lineage of 2232 Members [Province of Blekinge]"), published at Fischer, too, and translated into Swedish in 1920. In this book Lundborg had tried to trace an extended family's pathology. Using hundreds of genealogical tables he traced hereditary lines for epilepsy, mental diseases, negative traits of character, criminality and prostitution: a comprehensive register of human abnormalities. The result was still ambivalent. He described the lineage he investigated as degenerated, but predicted that it would be able to regenerate at least partly. Within the Blekinge microcosm Lundborg and his German colleagues found what would lurk the Swedish (or German) society (Lundborg 1913).

There were similar studies in Germany, too, e.g. Eugen Fischer's study about the "Rehobother Bastards", which was also published in 1913 (Fischer 1913). Such studies show three things: Firstly, the attempt to understand the "micro-physics" of eugenic processes in order to be able to draw conclusions on demographic developments. Secondly, the problem that such research could only be undertaken with extremely limited objects due to the vast amount of data. Thus, an overall picture could never be developed. Thirdly, due to a lack of genetical expertise, only the survey of *social* data (e.g. alcoholism, stubbornness, etc.) was possible. From this data experts deduced to the alleged core of "antisocial" behaviour. And still in the 1950s, eugenicists did not have enough data to actually prove their basic assumptions – instead the data had become that vast that in the long run it destroyed precisely these basic assumptions. Thus, the first generation of eugenicists became replaced by allegedly more scientific reform-eugenicists since the 1920s and they became in turn replaced by the allegedly scientific and objective human genetics since the 1940s. Every paradigm-shift was connected to the assumption that the eugenic theories now could be proved scientifically.



It is well-known that this way of thinking lead in Germany to the so-called extermination of “life unworthy of living” (*Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*). It is also known that extensive sterilising programmes were initiated in Scandinavia – Denmark since 1929, Sweden since 1935 – which were based on the same ideological basis. The reasons for this were the already mentioned fear of the population’s “degeneration” as well as the successive establishing of the modern welfare states since the early 1930s. In this early phase, social welfare was connected to the recipients’ bio-social “aptitude” in order not to waste any resources. Social welfare was not intended to merely relieve distress, but was part of a programme to create a physically and psychically “healthy” people that was up to the challenges of Modernity. The people in Sweden or Denmark respectively were to be conditioned for a capitalistic method of production in order to generate resources for the social-democratic welfare state (cf. Nilsson 2003).

#### IV.

For Sweden one also has to take the collectivistic structure of society into account that limited the individuals’ rights significantly (Rothstein 1992; Daun 1996). Thus, it is not wrong to compare the Swedish welfare state and the “Third Reich”. Three protagonists who wrote books that were very popular in both countries seem particularly interesting: Friedrich Burgdörfer and Alva and Gunnar Myrdal (cf. Etzemüller 2007, 53-68). Burgdörfer published “Volk ohne Jugend” (“A People without Youth”) in 1932; the latter “Kris i befolkningsfrågan” (“Crisis in the Population Question”) in 1934. The diagnosis is similar in both cases: the birth rate sinks dramatically because less and less families have children. This is due to the bad material conditions, but also to the women’s situation in modern society. Both sides thus propagated birth-encouraging welfare politics on the one hand and sterilisations on the other, so that the “valuable” classes would have more children and the “inferior” less. In this respect, the Myrdals and Burgdörfer are illustrative examples for the power of the already mentioned matrix.

Friedrich Burgdörfer was born in 1890 and was one of Germany’s leading statisticians since 1921. He was a member of the NSDAP and belonged to the crucial German and international demographic and race-political institutions. In 1945 he was released from his post. Since 1949 he was allowed to teach again and since the 1950s he once again became a member of several institutions and represented the German demography at international conferences (vom Brocke 1998). He published his scenario of crisis since the early 1930s: The German people ceased to be a growing people; they are about to exterminate themselves due to infertility. In most other European countries, the women’s net birthing capacity was higher than in Germany. Germany, according to Burgdörfer, already lacked an offspring of 8 million children. At the same time, the people

tended to live longer and longer. Thus, the number of old people increased and the top of the 'pyramid' broadened while its base shrunk. In this way, the 'pyramid' of a healthily constructed population – few old people and a young, numerous workforce – would develop into a bell first and finally into an urn: more and more old people were going to be pitted against fewer and fewer children. Their burden to provide for the older people would increase. Three to four children per family would be required, otherwise the population would become extinct in circa 300 years. The qualitatively premium, culture-bearing parts of the population (middle class and the rural population) extinguished themselves, while the significantly "less gifted part" was proliferating.

Burgdörfer claimed that one would only be able to solve the problem by improving the material situation of families with many children. Social welfare, however, would have to remain limited in order to prevent fertility from becoming a profitable business for those families. Fundamentally it was not the individual, but the *family* as the cell of the state and the people that was to be strengthened. He advocated a tax reform by which families were to be relieved while childless marriages were to pay higher taxes. Housing policy was to take care of overcoming the unhealthy living conditions in the cities. Furthermore, the city population was to be motivated to move back to the countryside and, thus, to develop healthily by a planned housing programme. A parenthood-insurance was supposed to ensure the living standards in order to secure the quantity and quality of the *Volkskörper*. The mothers' "double burden" was to be remedied by making female employment obsolete. Women were to attend to their natural job, i.e. to be a housewife and a mother and to give birth to children. In order to achieve that, Burgdörfer advocated religious and moral renewal, a mental retuning of the people (Burgdörfer 1932; 1929; 1930).

In 1934 "Sterben die weißen Völker?" ("Are the White Peoples dying?") was published. Here Burgdörfer prognosticated the same developments for other European countries as those he had anticipated to be a threat to Germany. They also ran the risk of being "outborn". The countries as such would not die out, but their inner structure and the balance of power between the peoples – i.e. the balance between "whites" and "coloureds" – would change. An exact definition of races seemed problematic to him, but that did not restrain him from henceforth putting *the whites* in opposition to *the coloureds*. The former choked their fertility and were about to commit demographic suicide ("*Rassenselbstmord*"). The biologically inferior coloureds increasingly proliferated. Globalisation would only intensify the problem since economy does not know any racial or ethnic differences, only workers and consumers. It would prefer cheap workers from foreign, primitive peoples and would thus abet the infiltration of dissimilar elements. France served him as an example. Here, so he claimed, the military would replenish its small number of recruits with Africans. By doing so, the French would accelerate the already existent foreign infiltration and would provide a dangerous breach for the foreign races to in-

vade the occident. With their deployment in the First World War, the coloureds had lost their respect for the whites, since they “defeated” a white people, i.e. the Germans in World War I. With this awareness, they returned to the colonies. And this would become a major threat. Everywhere, in South- and Central America, in the USA and Australia, according to Burgdörfer, negroes and indigenes were on the rise; soon “Africa would belong to the Africans” (Burgdörfer 1934, 81). There were not enough whites to populate the empty spaces of the earth and to prevent the coloureds’ expansion. “Will [...] they hold their grounds to the rising flood of coloureds, or will they be eroded and washed away by it?” (Burgdörfer 1934, 8). This vital question would not be decided on military battlefields, but by the mothers’ fertility. That was the only glimmer of hope and thus Burgdörfer deemed – in view of Italy and the “Third Reich” – change to be possible. Just like the disease, health could also be catching.

Alva and Gunnar Myrdal do still belong to the most important intellectuals in Swedish history. Their influence went, in addition to that, way beyond the small country in the north (Etzemüller 2010; Hirdman 2008). Gunnar Myrdal was born in 1898; his wife-to-be in 1902. Gunnar made a very successful career as an economist, social expert and economic politician; Alva Myrdal as a social expert and politician in different fields. Gunnar was awarded the Nobel Prize in economy in 1974 and Alva received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1982. With a lot of media attention they set out in the 1930s to fundamentally reform Swedish society. With poised instincts they barged into the Swedish discussion about the declining birthrate and conceived a book that would make the question of population the vehicle for a radical reform of society. In 1934 “Kris i befolkningsfrågan” was published and dominated – heavily criticised, but undisputed – the Swedish discussion about population (Myrdal and Myrdal 1997). They had put the book right between the different positions on the question of population in order to redefine the field anew. In the beginning, the diagnosis resembles that of Burgdörfer. They observed a dramatic decline of the Swedish birthrate. Men’s material situation, so they claimed, was precarious. They were only to keep their living standard, if fertility was to drop significantly below the reproduction limit. Few and few children were born in rural areas, too, and a flood of senile elderly was to be suspected. The lower social strata had too many, the upper too few children; this would only change, if contraceptive practices became known in the lower strata. The Myrdals shared the worry of a shrinking population with the – as they called them – conservatives. To both, so they claimed, a shrinking population would lead to an intake of “inferior human material” (Myrdal and Myrdal 1997, 107) into the attractive Sweden. These inferior people would lead to descending wages and threatened stability. The Myrdals did not, however, share the conservatives indignation about birth-control. Contraception would neither attack the morale nor lead to an automatic

decline in population. On the contrary: in line with the Neo-Malthusians they supported an active birth-control and the legalisation of abortions.

They considered the order of society to be the main problem. In pre-capitalistic times, so they claimed, the family was a unit of production and consumption well-adapted to the environment. Man and woman produced as a family. The age of liberal-capitalistic individualism reduced the family to consumption and led to a significantly more patriarchic society. The old family structure fitted less and less to the technical and industrial society. Women lost their formerly important role and society's increasing disorganisation was not to be corrected by some adjustments. Thus, economy had to be reformed first. Production and export had to be increased in order to provide the state with more financial resources. By doing so, production as well as consumption had to be subordinated in a planned-economy way to the interests of society. Then the incomes had to be radically redistributed in favour of the families, namely by a primarily prophylactic social policy that was to ease the material burden. Women, so they claimed, had less and less children, because their professional life, housework and motherhood were incommensurate. Thus, new apartments had to be built in a functional lay out that would reduce housework by rationalisation. The stress children could generate was finally to be reduced, so that women would decide to have children again. Already a few months after their birth, the children were to spend their days in nurseries, then kindergartens, preschools and schools.

Central to their thoughts was that in these institutions a new type of men was to be trained, since the "excessive" and "wrong" individualism of the "liberalistic age" had produced nothing but "atomised egoists", who were responsible for the declining birthrate. Thus, the children were to be freed from their unhappy and overburdened parents and their education to be collectivised, rationalised and depathologised in the nurseries and schools. They would learn social behaviour in the collective, learn the basics of a rational lifestyle, were under the constant supervision of teachers and doctors, who recorded and corrected any mental, social and sanitary deviation. Every child were to carry a health-card in which every observation was to be recorded, but also information on the parents and the living conditions at home. This programme was supposed to produce a new type of human in the long run. A voluntary, healthy, collective citizen, who would be able to harmonically (for himself) and optimally (for society) fit into social life. Only by employing these measures, the population would grow again and increase its quality at the same time.

The Myrdals thought, just like Burgdörfer, that mentally weak, physically, morally and socially disabled people produced to many children. How dangerous their genetic disposition really was, however, they were not sure about. The working class was not eugenically inferior *per se*, they claimed. The relevance of environmental factors was not to be underestimated. But a sediment of individuals that were unwanted for race-hygienic reasons, could be accurately

identified and singled out. In these (few) cases they wanted to sterilise extensively on the basis of eugenic and social indicators; if necessary, these sterilisations were to be forced, even though the eugenic effect of the means seemed quite uncertain to them. This “sediment” was the reason, why the Myrdals trusted in birth-control by contraception, abortion and sterilisation despite their intention to increase fertility: only those children that had a chance of good living conditions should be allowed to be born. There was no justification, so they claimed, that children grew up in socially bad circumstances or that they were educated by feeble-minded parents (Myrdal 1940; Myrdal 1941).

By comparing Burgdörfer and the Myrdals, the huge differences are striking. Burgdörfer found a seamless transfer into the ‘Third Reich’, while the Myrdals returned from the USA in 1940 to defend their country against an impending German invasion. Burgdörfer’s model of society was absolutely compatible to National Socialism; the Myrdals’ ideas might seem totalitarian at the first glance, their ideal of a political constitution was, however, doubtlessly democratic. Burgdörfer designed a socio-political programme in order to secure the traditional social structure, to increase the birth rate and to defend the nation. The Myrdals intended to radically remodel the outdated social structure and used the question of population as an argument for that. Burgdörfer and the Myrdals operated with the same people/space-model: the German or Swedish nation, respectively, as spaces with clear-cut boundaries were inhabited by a racially homogenous ethnic group. These peoples procreated insufficiently, thus both were threatened by “over-ageing” and “foreign infiltration”. In all their theoretical models, racially differentiated fertility was accompanied by socially differentiated fertility, i.e. the assumption that a sufficiently high or low fertility was desired. The world was separated in negative (foreign/anti-social) and positive elements. The unwanted parts of society had to be “cut” by sterilisation.

All three protagonists also shared a criticism of the capitalistic world order and the disastrous living conditions in the cities. It is furthermore noticeable that women were at the centre of attention. Burgdörfer did not mention men at all and the Myrdals discussed them only marginally. The projected population policy was completely concentrated on women. In Burgdörfer’s thinking they had to leave their jobs and return home. The Myrdals wanted to ease their chores at the homely stove and have them stay in their jobs in order to make them *want* to rise children. This seems to be a free choice, but boiled down to a conditioning of the women. They were supposed to learn to choose voluntarily what was good for them. Ultimately, both Burgdörfer and the Myrdals were all about coping with Modernity. All three of them were concerned with the burning, socio-political themes, namely the gender-question, the living conditions in the big cities, the nation and, finally, and overarching everything, the question how society could be strengthened against Modernity in the form of a *Volks-gemeinschaft*. This was not a genuine national-socialist issue, but a common

unease with Modernity. National-Socialist Germany – and Friedrich Burgdörfer with it – tried to solve the problem with dictatorial means, Sweden – and the Myrdals – in a democratic way. Problematising Modernity was common to all of them. Solving the question of population was supposed to tame Modernity (Etzemüller 2009).

Comparing these protagonists and these two countries therefore illustrates the ability of the population discourse to nestle into very different political contexts. Sweden was a society generally putting emphasis on inclusion. Eliminating “inferior” people was just the *ultima ratio*. The goal was always a strengthening of the *socialdemocratic* “folkhem”, i.e. the “People’s Home”. The “Third Reich”, on the other side, put emphasis on the extensive “elimination” of all “vermin to society”. In Sweden, sterilisations became less important only by the mid-70s. Up until then approximately 60,000 people – mostly women – had been sterilised; about 20,000 against their will. Even if this seems intolerable – at least this programme’s central aim always was one of “humanity” (Runcis 1998; Tydén 2002).

## V.

In Germany, there was no break after 1945. Even those German experts, who had undertaken most brutal experiments on humans in concentration camps, retained their influence. Attempts to stipulate ethnical differences via social criteria were still made. In 1962, Ilse Schwidetzky published her “Neue Rassenkunde” (“New Ethnogeny”). In the preceding year, a member of the younger generation, Hans Wilhelm Jürgens, qualified for a professorship with a thesis on “Asozialität als biologisches und sozialbiologisches Problem” (“Anti-sociality as a Biological and Socio-Biological Problem”). There was still the old eugenics in which human beings were evaluated according to their social quality. Human genetics, on the other hand, which now dominated the biological side of the discourse on population, viewed eugenics critically – but had the worldview really changed fundamentally? (cf. Schwidetzky 1962; 1954; 1950; Jürgens 1961; Müller and Pfeil 1952).

Looking at the “Third World” is like looking into a mirror. Since the 1950s the “Third World” increasingly became a new field for the population discourse. Back then the fear of declining birthrates and population in Europe and an increase of births and population in the colonies became manifest (Burgdörfer 1934; 1951). This model of industrial countries’ “underpopulation” and developing countries’ “overpopulation” shaped the discussion (cf. Kaiser 1981; Meadows 1972) – though with one characteristic shift: the “Third World’s” growth in population and its effects became the centre of attention. This was partly due to the “Cold War”, namely the worry that an impoverishment there would lead to a drift towards the Eastern Block. It was also partly due to a new “humanitarian” approach: population policy came to be seen as part of devel-

opment aid. Thus, programmes to check the population growth were demanded. One had to – following the paradigmatic Brundtland-Report from 1987 – help the *people* with education to self-determinedly choose the size of their families – after all, the *world* had a choice: either limit the “Third World’s” fertility or put the world’s food reserves at risk (Hauff 1987). This approach was paternalistic. Just like Malthus, it put the alimental base in the centre, i.e. an intensely growing population was contrasted with a not infinitely increasable agriculture. Furthermore, a pessimistic picture of the industrial countries’ “overflowing” with people from the developing countries was painted. Finally, the definitions of the problem were concentrated on women: if they had too few children in Europe, they were following the “wrong ideals” of “self-fulfilment” instead of thinking about “traditions”; while the women in the developing countries became too many, because they were still in the grip of tradition instead of becoming “emancipated”.

## VI.

I will now summarise the most important elements appearing in practically every text on the question of population – although in different ratios of mixing.

- The prognoses have been similar since a long time. It is always the sinking birthrate that is lamented. The population pyramid’s basis, i.e. the number of young people, shrinks. Due to the higher life expectancy the pyramid’s top broadens; the pyramid becomes the bell and finally the urn. The population was growing in absolute numbers, but this was due to an excessive immigration. Furthermore, this was considered as a chimera, because in the future the absolute population would shrink, too. In 1950 or 1985 or 2050 the absolute population would only be about a half or a third of the respective year of prognosis.
- Nearly all the texts make, still today, two mostly implicit though basic assumptions. Space and population are connected to each other. Space is understood as the territory of the nation states and their borders to neighbouring spaces. Thus, a certain relation between the spaces develops, since these spaces are inhabited by a certain population. The population – just like the space – is also thought of as a homogenous entity. One does not have to read nazi texts to find very clear statements that “population” always means allegedly ethnically ancestral inhabitants, which in the early 20th century was the ideal of the “nordic race”. German sociologist Elisabeth Pfeil formulated in 1939 with a rarely found clarity: “A space has a ‘force of concentrating to the inside and of separating to the outside’; relationships develop within a space and lead to an isolation to the outside” (Pfeil 1939, 5). To her, population was a community that experienced a space collectively and developed an otherness, a peculiarity compared with the inhabitants of other spaces. It

was the space that made a boarder between the inner and the outer, between the community and the others possible. Back then this was aimed at the national-socialist “Lebensraum”, but this double boarder that separates community and space from the other has basically shaped the political thinking about the population from the 19th century up until today.

- Thus, a specific correlation between space and population with a static and a dynamic component evolves. Every space has its population. The ideal is a fixed relation, but the reality is demographic fluctuation. On the one hand this fluctuation happens within a territory (e.g. rural exodus) and on the other between territories. This is due to a specific gap: There are spaces with too much and spaces with too little population. “Overpopulated” spaces develop a “population-pressure” on the neighbouring space; “underpopulated” spaces exert demographic pressure on the neighbouring spaces. The statistic *ideal* would be then: an optimum population that comes from a harmonic relationship between space and population. *Disaccords* lead to dynamics that are considered problematic. Decreasing birthrates would – and this is a repetitive argument to be found in those texts – inevitably lead to a shrinking population and this would make the space more attractive for eugenically “inferior” immigrants: e.g. Poles and other Slavs in Germany, Finns or other immigrants in Sweden, Morrocans and Italians in France. The resulting racial hybrids would, in any case, eventually threat the original inhabitants. Without the relation between space and population the assumption of an over- or underpopulation would not be possible.
- Thus, an odd connection between the demographic and the eugenic question seems to emerge. The discussion about population was never only about the population’s quantity, but also always about its quality. It was always an important question *who* had children and who did not, which children were wanted and which were not. Socially “worthy” people from the Middle- and Upper-strata had, according to the demographers, too few, while the socially “inferior” – i.e. proletarians in the negative sense, day labourers, beggars, mentally weak, etc. – had too many children. Since it was considered a valid assumption up to the 1950s that biological defects – such as epilepsy, mental disorders, cleft palates, alcoholism, anti-social behaviour, obstinacy, stinginess and so on – were passed on, such “elements” had to be deterred from procreation. Thus, sterilisation laws were enacted even before the “Third Reich”, e.g. in Denmark and Sweden (1929 and 1935, 1941, respectively), that were in force until the 1970s.
- Practically every author considered the cities as eugenically problematic spaces. The rural population that fled the country either climbed the social ladder in the cities and assimilated to the upper-strata’s generative behaviour, i.e. did not have any children anymore; or they descended socially, took over “anti-social” ways of living, which they passed on to way too many children. These, in turn, survived thanks to the modern social policy,



which had suspended nature's mechanisms of selection. Hence, demographic policy could not merely put emphasis on increasing the birthrate, but had to deter the eugenically dangerous "human material" from procreation, too. Potential immigrants were also eugenically problematic. They had to be blocked by an active nativity policy. The Swedish and several German demographers were actually no "Lebensraum"-propagandists, although their way of thinking was an important precondition for the aggressive politics of the "Third Reich". This thinking, however, did not seem very exotic – neither pre-1933 nor post-1945 –, as one can easily find in many German and Swedish texts. Eugenic demarcations remained a self-evident part of demographic argumentations way after the end of World War II.

- The diagnoses why married couples did not have any more children differed in details: the reasons were found in a "rationalisation of the sexual life", the incommensurateness of being a mother and having a career, the costliness of children in economically difficult times or the parents' will to satisfy their consumer drive before having children. Fundamentally, however, there was a broad consensus on the changing effects of modern lifestyle on the social- and the family-structures. The same Modernity that led to the eugenic degeneration of people due to urbanisation and industrialisation also impeded the desired births, since the "worthy" middle-strata either "suffered" from excessive consume or material hardship. This diagnosis was the justification for the – eugenically not undisputed – modern social policy in Sweden and Germany, which was supposed to form the basis for a larger number of children, which were socio-politically responsibly differentiated by "worthy" and "unworthy" recipients – not primarily following a differentiation of needy and non-needy.
- In the centre of the debate were – more or less explicitly – almost exclusively women. It were women that did not have any more children, since they allegedly rather pursued a career or lived in luxury. It were women at whom the socio-political programmes aimed at; and it were women who were generally sterilised – either because their husbands were supposed to be "anti-social" or because they were to be prevented from further "deterioration". In demographic *policy*, men were checked for their functionality in terms of providing for the family. In the population *discourse*, they almost do not appear and if so only as the bearers of future burdens.

## VII.

By summarising these points one can see how very much the argumentations followed one and the same basic structure: There is an ideal relation between space and "ancestral" population. *This relation is under a constant threat due to a growth of population at the wrong place and the wrong time. The starting-*

*point is always the woman: women are supposed to – depending on social strata or region – either increase or decelerate their fertility.*

In Sweden as in Western Germany one could still find the same demographic threat-scenarios as at the turn of the century. In 1976, a Swedish newspaper could actually make the situation subject to irony: “Are we now supposed to become extinct again?” (Svenska Dagbladet 1976). And a few years before geneticists in Germany had seriously discussed if a *one* percent increase of hereditary metabolic defects every thirty years would pose a threat to the population. “No”, said one geneticist, “yes”, another, because: “The human society can only then tolerate a life with unnecessary prostheses [i.e. therapies, medicine etc.], if it can totally secure a future life without any catastrophes” – which are threatening the fight against the accumulation of those diseases (Wendt 1970, 36). He nevertheless conceded that one should not bring out the big guns, e.g. sterilisations, but by diagnostic counselling suggest to parents to voluntarily waive genetically defect children.

Only with the beginning of the new millennium the opponents to the apocalyptic discourse could make themselves heard in the media. Since then the hysteric demographic scenarios of doom are contested more and more intensely. But, is that valid for the biological side of the population question, too? The population is still latently classified. With the term “human capital” individuals are demanded to decide either to “deselect” or to make their children fit for the postmodern meritocracy. The social lower strata are still considered as problem areas, in which too many children are born. It is not genetic defects and “antisociality” that is inherited anymore, but their resistance to education that threatens society’s human capital. Thus, the matrix that turns the question of population into a social question is still virulent.

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